

## **ADVANCE FOR NURSES – ADVANCE NEWS MAGAZINES**

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In the Spotlight

### **The Gift of Life**

Transplant nurse honors the past and brings hope for the present

By Candy Goulette

According to the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network, nearly 92,000 individuals are on the national waiting list for organ transplants. Just over 28,000 transplants were done in 2005. Every 16 minutes, someone is added to the national waiting list, and more than 2,200 patients on the list are children. An estimated 15,000 brain deaths occur in the U.S. each year, but only about 30 percent become organ donors. It often falls to the ED nurse to approach families about organ donation following untimely accidental deaths.

In California, RNs from four independent organ procurement organizations are on call to assist those families after they have made the decision to donate their loved one's organs. The job is both rewarding and somewhat sad, Dionne Weadon, RN, CPTC, said. A certified procurement transplant coordinator for the California Transplant Donor Network (CTDN), Weadon covers the Central Valley, generally Modesto and Stockton, but that territory can stretch. CTDN covers the northern part of the state from Visalia to the Oregon border, except the Sacramento area, and includes Reno and Northern Nevada.

### **On the Job**

Weadon has been a transplant coordinator for 5 years, after working in critical care. She's on call 9 times a month and averages 3-4 overnights every month. It's not unusual for her to work 24-30 hours straight on one case, evaluating and preparing organs for transplantation.

"Once the donation has been made, we do the initial workup on each donor," she said. "It's a very autonomous job. We write orders for meds, labs, cath lab, echo, X-rays any tests that are necessary then we consult with the advanced practice coordinator (APC) on donor management. We think outside the box. We optimize the patient first, then run a list for a recipient, based on blood type, then the APC offers the thoracic organs to transplant surgeons while our placement department offers out the abdominal organs."

The role of a transplant coordinator is demanding, Weadon said, but incredibly rewarding.

"As an ICU nurse, I tried to save the patient's life," she observed. "Now, as a transplant nurse, I'm working to save other people, but not the patient."

Weadon admits she loves the clinical aspect of her job, but it's the work she does with families that keeps her there.

### **No Death in Vain**

"As a transplant coordinator, I meet with families after they've already made the decision," Weadon noted. "They're letting me into their lives at the worst moment they've ever had. I want them to understand — and they want to believe — that this death was not in vain, that the life was not wasted."

Freak accidents happen, Weadon said. A child chokes on a cherry pit or drowns in a small amount of water in a bathtub. An adult just driving to the corner store forgets to put on a seatbelt and is broadsided. Most people die on the scene of a traumatic accident and never make it to the donor stage. But there are those who do save lives, she said, and the rewards for the family are enormous.

"These family members have been given the opportunity to let their loved one live on and give life to someone else," she said. "It helps with the grieving process. So when I begin the clinical process with the donor, I let the family stay in the room unless I'm doing an X-ray. They have given us this gift, and it's my job to maximize every organ, but I also want to make sure to honor their gift and their pain."

While some families don't want all of their loved one's organs donated, most do, Weadon said. It's her job to honor the gift no matter what it is.

### **Family Care**

As a nurse at the bedside, Weadon said her time with families was always short, taken up with clinical duties for the patient. That situation is reversed in this position.

"You have one-on-one time with the families of transplant donors, sometimes for days," she said. "Each donor has one nurse tending to them, and we can focus on the families and what they need. I never had the opportunity as a bedside nurse to give this level of care to the family."

Because the organ procurement process can take up to 48 hours, Weadon can offer time alone for family members with their loved one that is meaningful to them.

"I ask moms if they'd like to lie on the bed next to their child, or husband or wives if they'd like to lie down with their spouses," Weadon explained. "Some don't, but

most are so grateful to have that time with their family member. Some fall asleep on them. We don't have to worry about the wires and lines because we're only keeping the donor's organs alive and families can have time with a warm person. This gives them sweet memories and a real chance to say what they have to say.

"I am honored to be able to be with these families during this time," she continued. "These families — the donors — are giving the gift of life to people they don't even know and it's a blessing to be part of that."

For more information on organ donation, go to [www.donatelifecalifornia.org](http://www.donatelifecalifornia.org).

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